

## Interview with Bertha Potts

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BERTHA POTTS

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[Note: This interview has not been edited by Ms. Potts]

Q: This is an interview with Bertha Potts, who likes to be known as “Bert” Potts, a retired Foreign Service officer who served all of her career with the United States Information Agency (USIA). Bert could you tell us where and when you were born?

POTTS: I was born at four o'clock in the morning on the 26th day oDecember, 1915.

Q: *Where?*

POTTS: In Redwood City, California, which is about half way betweeSan Francisco and San Jose.

Q: *Could you tell us a little bit about your mother and father anyour family?*

POTTS: My mother and father were not educated people. My grandfather had apparently walked out on Grandmother and left her destitute, so my mother did the usual nine years of education and then went out to work as a salesgirl in a department store. My dad, I have no idea what his education was, was born in Trinidad, Colorado where his father was into

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mining. When Dad was about two or three, the family moved to Los Angeles where my father was raised.

*Q: What about your education?*

POTTS: I had the standard education of the period. There was not a mid or winter semester so if you were supposed to be going to high school at that point you were expected to do the first year in six months. So I did three and a half years of high school. I was out of high school when I was 16 and a half years old.

*Q: From there what happened?*

POTTS: I went right on to college, San Jose State college. I got mdegree by the time I was 20.

*Q: In what area?*

POTTS: In speech, communication and theater. I got out in the middle of the depression and couldn't get a job, so I went back for a fifth year and qualified as a teacher at the elementary level, but never got a job below the seventh grade. My first job was teaching the seventh grade in the school I graduated from.

*Q: What year was this?*

POTTS: That would have been 1937. I taught there for six years, interrupted by the year 1941-42 when I went to Connecticut on a teacher exchange. I was in Connecticut at the time of Pearl Harbor.

*Q: The war came along and I believe you became a member of the WACS.*

POTTS: That is true. I couldn't wait to join. I wanted to join so badly but when I returned home from that exchange in 1942, I could not get out of my teaching contract. So, I had to

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teach the 1942-43 school year. I was actually sworn into the military service in January or February of 1943 on delayed orders which meant they would give me a call-up when my school was out.

*Q: Where were you sworn in?*

POTTS: In San Francisco.

*Q: Where did you go from there?*

POTTS: Once I finally got into the service, they gave me one week and I was on the train to Fort Des Moines, Iowa for four weeks of basic training. Then they gave me an assignment on the post which was a clerk-typist position and very boring. I remember batting out Thanksgiving menus on a hot day in July. There was a lot of rumor running around the post concerning postings if one didn't have any foreign born grandparents, and since all of mine were born abroad I naturally thought this wasn't going to apply to me at all. But, I was told to report to a certain officer which I did. He said, "This is the first and only time in your military career when you are going to have a chance to say 'yes' or 'no.' I am going to ask you if you want this assignment." He didn't ask me about foreign grandparents at all. I said, "How will this affect my application for officer candidate school? I very much want to be an officer." He said, "Forget it. If you take this job all those papers will be thrown out and you will have to start over again because that is another military district, Washington, DC."

*Q: What was the job he was offering you?*

POTTS: He wasn't very specific. He only said that it was in the intelligence division. I said, "no" because I did not want to lose my chance to go to officer candidate school and assumed I had lost the job. Ten days later the orders were on my desk. The man lied from day one. Obviously he had no intention of telling me the truth. I had been chosen by the military service to go and I went.

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*Q: Where did you go?*

POTTS: To Washington, DC. To military intelligence at the Pentagon. I stayed there until I finally got another chance to go to officer candidate school in May 1945.

*Q: Did you take it?*

POTTS: Of course. I went back to Fort Des Moines, Iowa and took my 12 weeks of officer school and got my 2nd lieutenant's commission and the war was over in three weeks.

*Q: How long did you stay in?*

POTTS: Until April 30, 1946. I only got out because somebody offered me a Civil Service job in the Pentagon.

*Q: You were stationed in Washington?*

POTTS: Oh, yes.

*Q: You went back to military intelligence?*

POTTS: Yes. That was the agreement on the part of my colonel if I let me go.

*Q: Did this give you some interest in Foreign Service work, being in Washington?*

POTTS: Of course. You get deeply involved in it. While I was in this Civil Service job, which was primarily in the intelligence field, I got to know all the people in naval intelligence and some of the other people involved. They got me an interview to see a lady who said she might be interested in my serving abroad. So, I went to see this lady and she said, "Are you a bilingual librarian?" I said that I was a teacher not a librarian. She said, "Thank you very much. Good afternoon." The next day the phone rang and she said she would like me to come back again. On the second interview she suggested that if I got

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French, at my own expense, to where I could speak it, she could somehow change the title of librarian to some other kind of title, which she was prepared to do. So, I went to Berlitz, having the GI Bill, and took 100 hours of French conversation.

*Q: This was in Washington, DC?*

POTTS: Yes. I was just about at the end of the 100 hours of conversational French when I went to the movies with my French teacher and got back and found my orders on the table. I called the next day, since it was too late that night, to accept.

*Q: The orders were to where?*

POTTS: For Saigon, which is where I wanted to go. But, when I called she said, "Sorry, the orders have been changed since we mailed them to you. Your orders will be for Bangkok."

*Q: After you had studied French at Berlitz for a 100 hours.*

POTTS: That is right. I said that I wasn't sure I wanted to go to Bangkok. She said, "Maybe you better go and talk it over with your colleagues in the office." So, I talked it over with my colleagues in the office and they said, "Go, Bert, go. Take it, it might be a foot in the door." So, I accepted my orders and went to Bangkok in 1950.

*Q: You were at the embassy there?*

POTTS: No, I was always in the United States Information Service (USIS). In 1950 USIS was still a part of the State Department. It did not become a separate agency until 1953.

*Q: What was your job in Bangkok?*

POTTS: I did primarily exchange of persons. I worked on the language and speak a little Thai. I was too stubborn to do it the modern way. I think the first sentence I learned to put

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together was not “Good evening, Mr. Ambassador. How are you?” but “The water buffalo is in the middle of the rice field.”

*Q: What was the title of your job in Bangkok?*

POTTS: Assistant cultural affairs officer.

*Q: Do you remember the name of the public affairs officer (PAO) of the ambassador?*

POTTS: The ambassador was Edwin F. Stanton. I'm not sure who was the first PAO, but the second PAO was George Helyer, who disliked me intensely, and told me so.

*Q: Too bad. How long did you spend in Bangkok?*

POTTS: Just two years. Then I got the orders to Saigon.

*Q: Did you still remember your 100 hours of Berlitz French?*

POTTS: I had to do a little review which I did in Redwood City on home leave with my mother. I found a student at Stanford University who helped me.

*Q: This was 1952 or 1953?*

POTTS: This was 1952. I spent 1952-54 in Saigon.

*Q: Again as a cultural officer?*

POTTS: Yes.

*Q: This was before any real buildup of our forces in Vietnam.*

POTTS: Oh, yes. We were not involved at all.

*Q: But it was at the time of the French debacle there.*

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POTTS: Yes, and I was there at the time of Dien Bien Phu. I was there the day we were all assigned to go down to the docks where people were coming off ships, the great exodus from the north. We were given tins of milk to hand to the people and were asked to give them only to the elderly, pregnant women or little children.

*Q: These were Vietnamese refugees from the north?*

POTTS: Yes. They were so afraid of us that they wouldn't even take the milk. They thought we were going to poison them.

*Q: Did they think you were French?*

POTTS: No, they thought from their experience in the north that we were going to poison them.

*Q: From Saigon where did you go?*

POTTS: I went back to Washington for a two year tour.

*Q: 1953-54?*

POTTS: No, it was 1955 to March 1956.

*Q: This was after the United States Information Service (USIS) became a separate agency, the United States Information Agency (USIA)?*

POTTS: Yes, that happened in 1953.

*Q: You worked in that building on Pennsylvania Avenue?*

POTTS: Yes, 1776 Pennsylvania Avenue.

*Q: What section did you work in?*

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POTTS: I don't really remember what I did at that time.

*Q: Where did you go from there?*

POTTS: I was assigned to Lyon in southeastern France.

*Q: Ah, Lyon, the gourmet center of France.*

POTTS: Yes, it was a gourmet center.

*Q: That is a branch post?*

POTTS: Yes, of Paris.

*Q: There was a consulate there, I suppose?*

POTTS: A consulate general. The consul general and his consucouldn't stand us. They didn't like the PAO and didn't like me.

*Q: Who was the PAO, if I may ask?*

POTTS: The PAO was Edward Murphy who was the most wonderful man and dear friend of mine, who died a few years ago.

*Q: What did you do in Lyon?*

POTTS: I was simply an assistant to the PAO.

*Q: A two man post, was it?*

POTTS: Yes. For a while we did have a Foreign Service junior officer trainee. We also had for a very short time when I was first there a kind of cultural assistant, but she wasn't there very long. Nor was the trainee there very long.



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It was getting along to the end of that tour, which was a bit more than two years, and I had to go up to Paris for some reason or other. When I got there the special assistant to Mr. Cody, who was the PAO at that time in Paris, told me I was going to lunch with him today and I should go buy myself a hat. Mr. Cody refused to take women to lunch who were not wearing hats.

*Q: This was 1955-56?*

POTTS: This is virtually 1959, we are almost at the end of my Lyon tour. Ladies wore a hat to lunch, especially when they went with Mr. Cody.

He said, "I have heard some good things about your work down there, Bert. Where would you like to go next?" I said, "Oh, if I had my druthers, Mr. Cody, I want to go to Algiers." He said he thought that could be set up. The next thing I knew I had orders to Algiers.

*Q: Was Algiers then under our embassy in France?*

POTTS: It was technically part of USIS Paris, but it was so isolated that we felt ourselves more a part of the consulate general.

*Q: This was before Algiers was independent?*

POTTS: Oh, yes.

*Q: What year did you go to Algiers?*

POTTS: I went to Algiers in 1959 when I finished my tour in Lyon. I was there from 1959 to 1961, right in the heart of a shooting war. It was part of the seven-year war between the Arabs and the French. Q: Why did you choose Algiers?

POTTS: I have no idea. There was just something about it that intrigued me.

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Q: *You wanted to see the Casbah.*

POTTS: Well, I suppose. I did see it.

Q: *But, you knew the war was going on?*

POTTS: Oh, yes. It definitely was a shooting war and a bombing war. I lived out in the country for the first year, about fifteen minuets outside the city. Then, I finally got an apartment in town right in the same building as the consulate general. I worked late because the job in Algiers was to make friends with the people and make friends I did. I taught English.

Q: *On a regular schedule or informally?*

POTTS: Informally, but I am a professional teacher and don't have to have a standard curriculum to follow. I had junior chamber of commerce people on Tuesday at the cultural center. We got so friendly that we began having meetings in our own homes and soon there were appetizers and then full dinners. Every sixth week I had to have dinner for all of these people.

Q: *Who was the public affairs officer then?*

POTTS: Howard White.

Q: Were your relations with the consul general any better than in Lyon?

POTTS: Yes. We had very good relations with Freddy Lyon.

Q: *Relationships often depended on the attitude of thperson icharge.*

POTTS: Yes. So, bombs went off and there were bodies in the street, which was not a pleasant situation. I finished my tour and then begged to go home saying I was ready for

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a stateside tour. However, I was told that USIA was not ready to send me home yet. I was on home leave, and on a trip with my sister when her housemate in Bakersfield, California called our hotel in Las Vegas and said, "I have a telegram." "Well, read it." She said, "Well, I hate to open it, it is addressed to Bert." My sister said, "Open it. She has to know what it says." She opened it up and it said, "Welcome back to Southeast Asia."

*Q: Did it mention any particular post?*

POTTS: No, I found out when I made the call the next morning. I have forgotten the name of the chap doing assignments at that time. I said, "All right, is it Cambodia or Laos?" He said, "Why do you ask me that question?" I said, "Because I have already done Vietnam and you are not going to waste my French at this point." He said, "You are right, it's Laos."

*Q: What year was this?*

POTTS: This was 1961. I said, "What if I don't want to go to Laos?" He said, "Well, you better go to Laos. We have to have single, French-speaking officers. You are going to have a nice job. You are going to be cultural attach#." So, I went to Laos and had two PAOs there, Dan Moore and Gerry Gert. Jim Stoddard was the deputy, I believe.

*Q: Do you remember who the ambassador was?*

POTTS: I don't remember but he spoke terrible French. [transcriber's note: Winthrop Brown was ambassador 7/60-6/62 and Leonard Unger from 7/62-12/64.]

*Q: You were the cultural attach#?*

POTTS: I was the cultural attach# there, yes.

*Q: In which city were you stationed? There were two posts there.*

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POTTS: There were four postVientiane, the administrative capital; Louang Prabang, the royal capital; Savannakhet in the middle of the country; and Pakse in southern Laos.

*Q: Did we have USIA offices in all four places?*

POTTS: We did.

*Q: Where were you stationed?*

POTTS: I was in Vientiane where the embassy was located. LouanPrabang, Savannakhet and Pakse were branches.

*Q: This was 1961?*

POTTS: This was 1961 to 1963. I spent two full years to the day.

*Q: What kind of work did you do in Laos?*

POTTS: I was the cultural attach#.

*Q: Yes, but that can cover a lot of different tasks.*

POTTS: We ran the libraries, did all of whatever exchange programs existed, gave lectures and that kind of thing. I was not too happy there and was ready to shake the dust of Laos from my feet and leave on October 1, 1963 when I finished my tour.

*Q: Where did you go?*

POTTS: I talked them into a stateside assignment in Washington. I was there from 1964 to 1966. I was more or less kicked around for the first six months or so but during that time I managed to pass the interpreter's test in French and was tapped to be a French interpreter and escort for a very senior French art curator who happened to be a woman.

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*Q: An exchange person?*

POTTS: She was under the leaders and specialists exchange program.

*Q: You traveled around the country with her?*

POTTS: I traveled all around the country with her for 42 days. When I say 42 days, I don't mean six weeks, I mean 42 days. We did not have a day off. We worked morning, afternoon and went to private exhibits at night.

*Q: Did she do any lecturing?*

POTTS: She had no English, whatsoever. The only thing in English she could say was "Where is le ladies?" Why she used a masculine article with ladies I do not know. Only one exciting thing happened on that tour. While in Toledo we were scheduled to visit the Toledo museum. I had seen the Toledo people the night before and was told to come around 11:00 because there really wasn't that much to see. We showed up at 11:00, and she started looking around. I have never seen a reaction quite so exciting.

*Q: What kind of a museum was this?*

POTTS: An art museum. This woman was an art curator. This woman went almost out of her mind when she found a painting by a French impressionist named Caillebotte which had been lost to everyone in France. No one in France knew where that painting was and she found it in the Toledo museum. She said that he would have been the greatest had he not been killed in an accident.

Then she asked me why I hadn't gotten her over there earlier. This was the only time she ever blamed me for anything. She said, "Try to get me six rolls of film somewhere fast."

I then got assigned to the job I wanted which was working with our foreign employees who came to the States for training, orientation, and to see the United States. We had very

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good programs worked out for them. I enjoyed this buhad an unsympathetic boss. By then, 1966, I had become pretty good friends with the African head man at USIA and the only place I wanted to go was Morocco. So, I asked Mark and he said that he thought he could fix that.

*Q: That was Mark Lewis?*

POTTS: Yes, that was Mark Lewis. So, I was assigned to Rabat as English-teaching officer. I had to give up my diplomatic passport which I had as cultural attach# because English-teaching officers were not considered for diplomatic status. I had friends who were counseling me not to give up the diplomatic passport, but I wanted that job so badly that I was willing to do it. I really thoroughly, thoroughly enjoyed that job. I ran a big English-teaching school.

*Q: Was it a Bicentennial Center type of operation?*

POTTS: No, we ran it.

*Q: Teaching English to Moroccans?*

POTTS: Yes and anyone else who wanted to come and sign up. We hasome French people.

*Q: Who was the public affairs officer in Morocco?*

POTTS: I had three. The first one was Ned, I can't remember his last name, then Dick Monsen and Bill Payeff. Bill Payeff was not very fond of Morocco and called Rabat "Dogsville." So, I stayed there through three PAOs and two cultural attach#s. Ed Fairley was cultural attach# and then Margot Cutter.

After three years there, I loved the job so much I wanted to come back and told personnel I would be willing to stay on another couple of years. I would delay my home leave and

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spend another couple of years in Rabat and then return home and retire. But they wanted to send me back to Washington and didn't listen to my request. At that point I made up my mind and said, "If that is what you want, it is not what I want, so I will retire."

*Q: That concludes the interview with Bert Potts.*

End of interview